



Preventing Abuse of *Older Adults*



Preventing abuse of older adults

We don't like to think it, but some older adults are abused

Most older adults get along well with their family members. But in some cases, older adults are abused by family members, caregivers or strangers.

Abuse of family members happens to both older and younger family members. In Canadian surveys, older adults are less likely than younger people to report abuse or neglect within their family relationships. However, abuse of older adults does happen.

A 1999 Statistics Canada survey indicated that about seven per cent of older Canadians have reported they have experienced some form of emotional or financial abuse in the previous five years.¹



What is in this booklet

This booklet will help you learn:

What is abuse

- Understand what abuse of older adults is
- Recognize abuse of older adults

What you can do

- Know what to do to help an older adult who is being abused

Where to get help

- Know where to get help to assist an older adult who is being abused

Alberta Children and Youth Services is proud to lead Alberta's Prevention of Family Violence and Bullying Initiative.

*Definition of family violence**

Family violence is the abuse of power within relationships of family, trust or dependency that endangers the survival, security or well-being of another person. It can include many forms of abuse including spouse abuse, senior abuse and neglect, child abuse and neglect, child sexual abuse, parent abuse, and witnessing abuse of others in the family. Family violence may include some or all of the following behaviours: physical abuse, psychological abuse, criminal harassment/stalking, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, financial abuse and spiritual abuse.

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* This is Alberta Government's definition of family violence as identified in the *Finding Solutions Together* report.

“Every time my granddaughter comes to visit, I notice things missing from the house. My gold ring went missing today. It was a gift from my late husband. I phoned my son and he told me I must have misplaced the ring myself. He reminded me of the time I thought the car had been stolen at the mall, but I’d only gone out the wrong exit. Maybe I am getting old and forgetful like he says. But I know where the ring was this morning, and it was gone after my granddaughter visited.”

What is abuse of older adults?

ABUSE TACTICS

Abuse of older adults is any action or inaction that can harm an older person’s health or well-being. Abusive behaviour is used to control, harm or frighten the older person.

Abuse of older adults can take many forms. Abuse tactics may be emotional, financial, spiritual, medical, physical or sexual. Abuse tactics may also include intimidation or neglect.

Emotional abuse tactics are usually present when other forms of abuse occur.

Tactics may include:

- Name-calling or insults
- Humiliation
- Any words or actions intended to make the older adult feel stupid, helpless or unworthy
- Keeping the older adult away from friends and family

Financial abuse tactics may include:

- Withholding money
- Forcing the older adult to turn over assets, signing authorities or possessions to the abuser
- Misusing a power of attorney
- Paying for the abuser’s expenses
- Fraud, embezzlement or theft

Medical abuse tactics may include:

- Withholding prescription medications
- Forcing the older adult to take too much medication

Neglect tactics may include:

- Failing or refusing to care for an older adult
- Not providing or withholding food or health care
- Not providing companionship
- Not helping with activities of daily living

Intimidation tactics may include:

- Pressuring the older adult to do something
- Using threatening words or gestures
- Making unwanted visits or telephone calls
- Doing or saying anything intended to frighten the older adult

Spiritual abuse tactics may include:

- Making fun of the older person’s spiritual beliefs or practices
- Interfering with the older person’s spiritual practices
- Making it hard for the older person to be with others in their spiritual community

Physical abuse tactics are any action that could cause physical pain or injury.

Physical abuse tactics may include:

- Pushing, slapping, pinching, hair pulling, choking, and so on
- Not allowing the older person to move
- Not allowing the person to go out

Sexual abuse tactics may include:

- Unwanted sexual touching
- Sexual activity without voluntary consent
- Forcing degrading, humiliating or painful sexual acts

In a 1999 Statistics Canada survey,² emotional abuse was the most frequent type of abuse reported.

- Seven per cent of all older adults reported emotional or financial abuse in the previous five years
- About two per cent of older Canadians reported experiencing more than one type of abuse by a child, caregiver or spouse
- About one per cent of older adults reported financial abuse
- About one per cent of older adults reported physical or sexual abuse

WHO IS ABUSED?

Any older person may become a victim of abuse. Men and women of any income level, cultural or ethnic group can be victims of abuse. Those who have physical or mental health issues are at greater risk, but healthy seniors may also be victims.

Ninety per cent of older adults live independently. That makes it easier for abuse of all kinds to go undetected. As the number of older adults in our population increases, abuse of older adults may increase.³

WHO ABUSES OLDER ADULTS?

- In 2004, 39 per cent of older women and 21 per cent of older men who were victimized, were victimized by a family member⁴
- In some cases, the abuse of older adults is a continuation of years of spousal abuse
- In some cases, adult sons or daughters who abuse their older parents live in the same home as the older parents
- In cases of physical violence reported to police, older women were more likely to be abused by their spouses. Older men were more likely to be abused by their adult children⁵

What are clues that an older adult is being abused?

Any of the following might be a clue that someone is abusing an older adult:

If there is emotional or physical abuse, the older adult may:

- Seem frightened, withdrawn, depressed or apathetic
- Seem groggy or “dopey”
- Seem too thin or have lost a lot of weight
- Be wearing dirty clothing or clothes not suitable for the season
- Not have glasses, hearing aid or dentures
- Have bruises, sores or broken bones



“My son means well, but nothing ever goes right for him. He’s lost his job again and can’t make his house payments. He asked me to sign over my pension cheques to him. I don’t really want to, but he says it’s only until he gets back on his feet. If I don’t he might have to declare bankruptcy. He says I can prevent that from happening. We don’t want something like that to happen in our family. We’ve always paid our bills on time. We don’t want to have our family name in the paper. Everyone will know.”

If there is financial abuse, there may be:

- Unexplained sale of property or items missing from the person’s home
- Someone other than the older adult cashing pension cheques, or the older adult’s bank account being overdrawn

If you are an older adult...

IF YOU ARE BEING ABUSED, YOU MIGHT FEEL...

...that you’re all alone.

You are not alone. Friends, family members, neighbours, home care workers, doctors and other service providers might all be able to help you. There are also many community resources available. Possible places to get help are listed at the back of this booklet.

...that you’re old and worthless.

You are a valuable human being, even if someone says you’re not. There are negative stereotypes and attitudes about getting older, but you are someone with a lifetime of experience, knowledge and contributions. Everyone is valuable. That includes you. At any age, you have the right to be free from abuse.

...that you’re a burden.

You are not a burden. Every person needs help from others at some point. If your family is feeling overwhelmed, there are many ways for them to get help to meet your needs. Abuse is not the solution. Getting help can be.

...that you can’t tell anyone.

You can tell someone. Pick a person you trust, such as a friend, neighbour, other family member, health care worker, spiritual adviser or community services staff person. It’s okay to ask for help. If the person you tell doesn’t seem to take you seriously, tell someone else who does. Silence nearly always leads to further abuse. You have the right to a future free from abuse and violence.

...that it’s your fault, especially if the abuser is your child or spouse.

Abuse is not your fault. People make their own choices. Your abuser is responsible for his/her own actions – not you.

Many older adults feel the need to protect their children, spouse or other family members, even if their family members are treating them badly. Maybe a sense of responsibility or a sense of shame makes you feel you shouldn’t speak out. The truth is, abusive behaviour is not healthy for you, for your abuser or for anyone else. It’s okay to ask for help.

...that the abuse is a life-long pattern and there’s nothing you can do.

You can do something to end the abuse. You might think the abuse is the same spousal abuse that started many years ago. Maybe you think your abuser is getting even for the abuse they received years ago as your spouse or child. Even so, the abuse can end. Talk to a person you trust or to one of the community resources listed at the back of this booklet. It’s never too late — the cycle of abuse can end.

...that your abuser doesn’t really mean it and will change.

Abuse does not stop on its own. You may feel confused about the actions of a person who is supposed to care about you. The person may apologize and promise to change. But abuse almost never stops until someone does something to stop it. The most common pattern is of the abuse becoming more serious and more frequent the longer it is allowed to continue.

...that your abuser was stressed or intoxicated, so it doesn't count.

All abuse matters. Stress, alcohol, drugs or any other factors do not take away a person's responsibility for choices and behaviour. Abuse is harmful to everyone involved, no matter what else is going on.

...that you will have nowhere to go if you upset your abuser.

You do not have to stay in an abusive situation. There are laws to protect you from someone taking your home and assets. You or your abuser may be able to use emergency housing on a short-term basis. A friend, family member or community professional can help you, or you can contact one of the resources listed at the back of this booklet.

ACTIONS THAT CAN HELP PROTECT YOU AS AN OLDER ADULT

1. Stay as involved and active as you can for as long as you can.

- Stay active in your community as much as possible through a club, senior centre, church or cultural group
- Develop friends of all ages
- Plan your own future when you are well and healthy
- Make a will. Review it regularly with someone who is not affected by your decisions
- Choose someone you trust to make health care and financial decisions for you if you become unable to make them yourself. Put your choice in writing. The person you choose does not have to be a family member

2. Protect yourself against financial abuse or property loss.

- Have more than one trusted advisor for your financial affairs
- Arrange to have pension and other cheques deposited directly into your bank account
- Be careful when you arrange for home repairs or renovations
 - If someone is trying to sell you a home renovation or repair, ask people you trust about it. Get advice from them about reasonable costs and guarantees
 - Ask someone who knows about renovations or repairs to speak to the people who will be doing the work. This way, the people doing the work will know that you have a knowledgeable person watching out for you
- Help to make your home burglar-proof by storing jewellery or special things out of sight or in a safe deposit box
- Never promise your home or possessions in exchange for someone's help and care

3. Protect yourself against potential abuse or neglect. Think about this especially in situations that could be tense or pressured.

- If an adult child wants to return home to live, or if you are thinking of moving in with an adult child, think about what you need to do to stay safe
- Set conditions and put them in writing. List how you expect the person to treat you emotionally and physically
- Make sure someone other than you and the adult child has a copy of the agreement
- Make sure someone outside the household will check how things are going
- Arrange for someone outside the household to know about your medical condition and medications
 - The person could be a doctor, a home care worker, a volunteer visitor or a trusted friend
- Arrange for the person to visit from time to time
- Arrange for the person to visit sometimes without telling anyone in advance

“My grandson got into the wrong crowd and I know he's using drugs. He knows the day when the pension cheques come in the mail, and he comes over to my house and demands money. I am frightened. He is six feet tall. He was a happy little boy. Now I hardly recognize him. He is so angry all the time and sometimes he acts desperate. He actually waved his fist in my face the last time he came over to wait for my pension cheque. I'm afraid he will hurt me if I don't give him money.”





“When I moved in with my daughter, I thought it would be okay because we’d always been close. But since I got sick it’s been different. I can’t manage the stairs on my own any more. My son-in-law won’t let anyone help me if they’re busy doing something like watching a TV show or playing a game. I do understand, but the bathroom is on the second floor. Since my surgery, I can’t hold on very long. Twice I’ve had an accident while I was waiting for someone to help me with the stairs. I was so embarrassed. My son-in-law called me a baby and now he teases me about needing diapers. When I talked to my daughter about it, she said I’d better just ignore it and consider myself lucky he’s willing to let me stay here. I wish I were not such a burden to my family.”

4. Protect yourself if someone is physically harming or intimidating you.

Be aware that if you are thinking of leaving a situation where violence or abuse has happened, this is often a dangerous time. That doesn’t mean you should stay. It means you need to take care to be safe.

- **If you are in immediate physical danger, call 911**

- If someone is harming you physically, making unwanted visits or phone calls, or is frightening you, tell police. It is a crime called criminal harassment
- You may be able to arrange for a protection order that would stop an abusive person from having contact with you
 - The police or a Victim Services Unit can help you learn how to get a protection order
 - Helpful phone numbers are listed at the back of this booklet, in the section called “Get help”
- Tell someone about what is happening
 - If the person you tell does not seem to take you seriously, tell someone else
 - The more people that know about the abuse, the more likely it is that someone will be able to help stop it

If you are concerned about an older adult

IF ABUSE HAPPENS TO AN OLDER ADULT YOU KNOW, YOU MAY FEEL...

...that it’s none of your business.

It is your business.

- Preventing abuse is everybody’s business in a safe and caring community

...that there’s nothing you can do.

There is much you can do to help.

- An act of support and positive encouragement can make a big difference to someone who is being abused
- Speak out about abuse
- Set a positive example
- Some seniors’ lodges and care centres get funding from the Alberta government. *The Protection for Persons in Care Act* requires people to report any abuse in those facilities. If the person you are concerned about lives in a seniors’ lodge or care complex, report the abuse
- If the person lives independently, you can contact one of several community or government resources for them. A list is at the back of this booklet

...that it’s hopeless to get involved.

You can make a big difference.

- People who are abused generally develop very low self-esteem and lose their self-confidence
 - You can help an older adult feel like a human being with value
 - On the following page is a list of other things you can do
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How to help an abused older adult

IF YOU SUSPECT THAT AN OLDER ADULT IS BEING ABUSED

1. Understand the older adult may not know this is abuse, or may not want to admit it.

Many abused people do not know that the behaviour they are living with is abuse. It may take time before they begin to understand that someone is abusing them, especially if it is someone they love. This is a painful thing to accept. Recognizing abuse and deciding what to do about it takes time. It is a process, not an event. You will need to be patient while you offer support.

As well, many older adults in abusive situations find it hard to talk about. They may be ashamed or afraid. If the abusive person is a family member, the older adult may feel strong guilt about revealing the abuse. He or she might be afraid that talking about the abuse will bring shame on the family or cause harm to the abusive family member. The older adult may even be afraid to speak up in case the abuse gets worse.

2. Find the right words to open the door for the person to talk.

Here are some examples of things that you could say to an older adult who may be abused. You will have your own words to express these messages.

- “Are you okay?”
 - “I’ve noticed lately you are more and more withdrawn. We don’t see much of you anymore. When we do, I’ve noticed that you are quieter and look troubled. I don’t mean to pry, but sometimes that means a person is not being treated very well by someone close to them”
 - “I’ve been in an abusive situation and I can see the signs. (Say this only if it’s true.) Here are some things I see and hear that tell me you might be in an abusive situation. (Say what you have noticed.) From my experience, there are two things I can tell you:
 - I can tell you that abuse doesn’t stop unless someone does something to stop it
 - I can tell you that you don’t deserve to be abused. Nobody does”
 - “You’re not alone. It can happen to anyone. It’s not your fault and you didn’t do anything wrong. But we do need to protect you. Let’s figure out how to do that. I know we will be able to find help”
 - “Whatever happens, and whatever you decide to do, I’ll back you. Tell me how I can help — now or whenever”
3. Once the older adult understands this is an abusive situation, encourage the person to contact community agencies and other resources to get help. These organizations can help the person assess their level of risk or danger, help them with safety planning and connect them to other sources of help. Suggestions on where to get help are listed at the back of this booklet.

IF AN OLDER ADULT TELLS YOU ABOUT ABUSE

WHEN THE PERSON TELLS YOU ABOUT ABUSE

1. Listen.

- Take them seriously
- Listen quietly and carefully
- Let them speak at their own pace and in their own style
- Do not interrupt. Just nod to let them know that you are listening

“When my mom got sick, her youngest sister Ella came to visit her for three weeks. At first, we were glad that Aunt Ella was going to look after Mom in her own home. After a while, though, we started to get uneasy. Whenever we phoned, Aunt Ella would always say Mom was resting and couldn’t come to the phone. I stopped by at lunchtime, thinking Mom would surely be up then, but Aunt Ella wouldn’t let me in. She said Mom wasn’t feeling well and didn’t want to see anyone. By the third week, several of us went to Mom’s house together, and Aunt Ella finally let us in. Mom seemed really confused and groggy — not like her usual self at all. After Aunt Ella left, we found out that Mom had changed her will so that Aunt Ella would inherit Mom’s house.”

2. When they have finished speaking, say something like, “I’m sorry to hear this.”
 - When it seems appropriate, say something like, “I just want to make sure I understand what you’ve said”
 - Then say back what you understand the person has told you
3. When you and the older person are clear that you understand, say something like, “I will help you if I can” (if that is true).
4. If you are going to be talking for a while, check for the person’s immediate physical and medical well-being.
 - Is the person in a physically safe environment?
 - Does the person need to eat, have a glass of water, get to a bathroom, take medications or sit down and rest for a while?
 - Take care of any immediate physical or medical needs
5. Reassure the person, by reminding them that:
 - It was right to tell someone about the abuse
 - The abuse is not their fault
 - The abuse is the responsibility of the person who is abusive
6. Make sure the person is safe.
 - Check what can be done to make sure the person is safe right now
 - Encourage the person to develop a longer-term safety plan. Women’s shelters or police services can help people develop a safety plan
7. Pave the way for the person to get other help.
 - Find out what the person would find helpful
 - Offer to help the person to connect with sources of help in the community and follow through. The information listed at the back of this booklet can help you start
8. Ask, “Is there anything you would like me to do right away?”
9. Before the conversation ends, confirm what will happen next — for example, you will call back in an hour or a day, or you will find some information, etc.

AFTER THE PERSON HAS TOLD YOU ABOUT ABUSE

1. If the abuse involves theft, fraud, assault, neglect or other illegal actions, contact the local police, RCMP detachment or Tribal police.
2. If the abuse took place in a lodge, hospital or long-term care facility, you are required by law to report the abuse through the toll-free Protection for Persons in Care Reporting Line. Call **1-866-331-3933**.
3. Find out about help in the community. A starting point is to contact some of the resources listed at the back of this booklet.
4. Keep checking on what the person wants to do and support that.
 - The person may be confused. Abuse will do that to a person
 - They may decide something and then change their minds. That is okay
5. Accept that the person may want to stay in the situation.
 - Do not criticize and do not judge
 - Understand that changing or leaving an abusive situation is not easy
 - Remind the person that you are there and you will help if you can, no matter what the person decides

SUGGESTIONS FOR FAMILIES AND CAREGIVERS OF OLDER ADULTS

- 1.** When an aging parent or relative needs additional care, discuss the best way to meet these needs with the older person and family members.
 - Consider how to handle the transition from independence to dependence
 - Talk about medical care, financial matters and practical aspects of daily living
 - 2.** Think about your own ability to provide care for someone who may become more and more dependent.
 - Are you and your family able to care for an aging parent or relative in your home on a short-term or long-term basis?
 - 3.** Ask your family members how they feel about caring for an aging parent or older relative. Think about how caregiving will affect your spouse and children.
 - 4.** Consider the physical realities of your home.
 - Does it have awkward steps or stairs?
 - Does the bathtub or shower have safety rails?
 - Will there be a private bedroom?
 - Will the older adult be able to get to the public places and services he or she likes to use?
 - 5.** Learn about community help for older persons and their families. Take advantage of all the help that fits your needs.
 - 6.** Remember all relationships need time alone as well as time together.
 - Transitions often involve feelings of loss and grief
 - Respect each other's privacy
 - 7.** Keep a sense of humour.
 - 8.** Ask for support.
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RESPONDING TO A PERSON WHO ABUSES AN OLDER ADULT

If you have any concerns at all about talking to an abusive person, then don't do it. Trust your instincts. Confronting a violent or abusive person is dangerous. Be aware of the risks, and do not leave yourself open to harm.

However, if you know someone who acknowledges abusing an older adult, and the person expresses the desire to change, here are some things you could say.

ABUSIVE BEHAVIOUR IS LEARNED

You could let the person know that abusive behaviour is learned. It is not “automatic.” No matter what the circumstances, abusive behaviour is a choice. If the abusive person you know wants to make other choices that are not harmful, the person will have to be committed to changing the behaviour.

HELP IS AVAILABLE

Encourage and support the person to find community resources to stop the abusive behaviour. Resources listed below give a place to start.

If you realize the person is under great stress, talk about how to get help to deal with whatever is stressful. Offer to help the person find community resources that may help.

If you know of programs for people who abuse older family members, let the person know about them.

HOLD THE ABUSIVE PERSON ACCOUNTABLE

Abuse of older adults is not caused by the older adult, by stress, by addictions, by financial pressure or by any other circumstances. The abusive person makes the choice to belittle, exploit or dominate. The abuser alone is responsible for these choices. The abusive person needs to understand this in order to make the mental shift to end the abuse.

Get help

- **If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, call 911.**
- Visit www.familyviolence.alberta.ca or call the 24-hour Family Violence Info Line toll-free at **310-1818**.
- Emergency protection orders, restraining orders and peace bonds are some of the legal ways to stop an abuser from contacting someone. Call your local police to get information on how to apply for a protection order.
- **Alberta Seniors and Community Supports** offers financial assistance and service programs for seniors living in Alberta. The Seniors Information Line provides detailed information on a wide range of programs that are available to Alberta seniors. The Alberta Seniors Benefit, Special Needs Assistance, Dental and Optical programs are based on income. The Education Property Tax Assistance program is targeted to Alberta seniors who own their own home. Information is available by calling toll-free in Alberta: **1-800-642-3842** or Edmonton and area: **780-427-7876** or by visiting www.seniors.alberta.ca.

¹ Trainor, C. (Ed.). (2002, June). *Family violence in Canada: A statistical profile 2002* (Catalogue No. 85-224-XIE). Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/85-224-XIE/85-224-XIE00002.pdf>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ogradnik, L. (Ed.). (2006, July). *Family violence in Canada: A statistical profile 2006* (Catalogue No. 85-224-XIE). Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada. Retrieved from http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfv-cnivf/familyviolence/pdfs/fv-85-224-XIE2006000_e.pdf

⁵ Ibid.



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